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ABSTRACT

This review of literature examines student communication behaviors and their influence on teachers and teaching. The purpose of this paper is two-fold. First, it reviews recent communication research that examines student communication behaviors and how their verbal and nonverbal messages have been shown to influence the instructional process in the American educational system. This research remains significant not only because of what we know about the transactional nature of human communication, but also because of the continual pedagogical shift away from teacher-centered and toward student-centered models of instruction in the United States. The second purpose for this paper is to stimulate a conversation among Russian communication scholars regarding the role of communication in the Russian classroom. Realizing that some of this research may not be applicable and/or culturally appropriate, it is hoped that this paper will help highlight similarities and differences between Russian and American models of instruction and perhaps stimulate new programs of instructional communication research and research partnerships. (Contains 20 references.) (Author/RS)

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Running head: STUDENT COMMUNICATION AND CLASSROOM INFLUENCE

# Student Communication Behaviors and Their Influence on Teachers and Teaching in the American Classroom: A Review of *Recent* Communication Research

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Abstract

This review of literature examines student communication behaviors and their influence on teachers and teaching. The purpose of this paper is two-fold. First, it reviews recent communication research that examines student communication behaviors and how their verbal and nonverbal messages have been shown to influence the instructional process in the American educational system. This research remains significant not only because of what we know about the transactional nature of human communication, but also because of the continual pedagogical shift away from teacher-centered and toward student-centered models of instruction in the United States.

The second purpose for this paper is to stimulate a conversation among Russian communication scholars regarding the role of communication in the Russian classroom. Realizing that some of this research may not be applicable and/or culturally appropriate, it is hoped that this paper will help highlight similarities and differences between Russian and American models of instruction and perhaps stimulate new programs of instructional communication research and research partnerships.

# Student Communication Behaviors and Their Influence on Teachers and Teaching in the American Classroom: A Review of *Recent* Communication Research

In a 1992 *Communication Education* article on effective teacher behaviors, Jon Nussbaum encouraged researchers to pull away from examining teaching as a static and linear process. Instead, he advocated that communication and education researchers examine teaching as a complex phenomenon that is best conceptualized as dynamic and transactional. Rather than focusing exclusively on teacher behavior as the "golden cause" of student achievement, Nussbaum reminded researchers to examine how student behaviors may influence teachers and their teaching.

There are several reasons for examining how student communication behaviors have been shown to influence teachers and their teaching. First, it remains more true to contemporary conceptualizations of human communication where communication is defined as a mutually influential and reciprocal process. The majority of teaching effectiveness research ignores the transactional and relational aspects of student-teacher interactions (Nussbaum, 1992). Brophy and Good (1974) suggested that teachers' actions toward students are actually reactions to students' behavior. Although examining how students influence teachers still remains linear in terms of the directional influence, examining this reverse relationship comes a step closer to capturing the transactional nature of classroom communication because it addresses and acknowledges the fact that students influence teachers and their teaching.

The second reason is because of what is known about how teachers form expectations for their students and how these expectations influence teaching.

Since the publication *of Pygmalion in the Classroom* (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968), there has been much interest and attention paid to the effects of teachers' expectations of their students on the achievement of those students. Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) reported on a study where elementary school teachers' expectations about some of their students were manipulated in a way that was intended to be beneficial to those students. In this study, teachers were led to believe that some of their students were "late bloomers" and that they would achieve at an accelerated pace sometime soon after the beginning of the school term. Actually, the students who had been labeled "late bloomers" were randomly selected from the class and were considered average to below average in terms of their intelligence.

The results from this study revealed the power of teacher expectations on student achievement. The "late blooming" students improved their IQ scores dramatically compared to other students who were not labeled. This study suggested that teachers form expectations for their students and communicate in a manner that remains consistent with those expectations. Important to this review of literature is the role student communication plays in the formation of teacher perceptions and expectations for how students will perform in the classroom.

The third reason for examining the effects of student communication on teachers and teaching is because teachers have been known to use student communication as information to monitor and evaluate their teaching effectiveness. Gage and Berliner (1992) mentioned that teachers, like dancers, actors, and musicians, assess their performance by "reading" their audience. Clark and Peterson (1986) found that during instruction, the greatest proportion

of a teacher's thoughts deal with how well instruction is being received by students. This research suggested that student behaviors ultimately influence teachers' motivation to teach, and teachers' perceptions of their teaching effectiveness and satisfaction. These three variables remain important in light of the current teacher shortage that the United States is facing.

## Review of *Recent* Literature

This review of literature focuses on communication research conducted in the mid to late 1990s and the early part of the new millennium. The review of literature is divided by research variables. The first part examines quiet students. The second part examines students' nonverbal communication behaviors. The third part focuses on student humor. The fourth and fifth parts focus on new experimental research that examines the effects of student verbal and nonverbal communication on teachers' perceptions, anticipated teaching behaviors, and interaction adaptation patterns in the classroom.

### *Quiet Students*

In American, quiet children tend to be at a clear disadvantage in the classroom. In general, quiet students are perceived to be less competent than more talkative students (Richmond & McCroskey, 1995). According to Richmond and McCroskey (1995), teachers expected quiet students to do less well in school and as a result, treated them as being less intelligent. Quiet students were less likely to be called upon in the classroom, ask for assistance, participate in classroom activities, and engage their teachers in conversations about course content. Consequently, quiet students were less likely to learn from their mistakes and less likely to receive positive reinforcements from their teachers.

Instructional research also suggested that the quiet college student was significantly below the more talkative college student in grade point average at the end of the first year of college. While quiet students tended to achieve at levels less than their aptitudes would justify, talkative students may achieve at levels above what their aptitudes would justify (Richmond & McCroskey, 1995).

*Student Nonverbal Communication Behaviors*

Students who are perceived to be less nonverbally responsive and immediate have also been shown to be at a disadvantage in the classroom. Mottet (2000) found that instructors' perceptions of students' nonverbal responsiveness were positively related to their impressions of students, their perceptions of teaching effectiveness, teaching satisfaction, and quality teacher-student interpersonal relationships. Mottet found 35% of the variance in teachers' perceptions of student competence was attributed to their being nonverbally responsive in the classroom. Additionally, he found 35%, 36%, and 34% of the variance in teachers' perceptions of their teaching effectiveness, teaching satisfaction, and quality of teacher-student relationships, respectively, were attributed to students being nonverbal responsive in the classroom.

Baringer and McCroskey (2000) found similar results. Teachers' perceptions of student credibility, interpersonal attraction, and liking increased significantly and meaningfully as students were perceived as being more nonverbally immediate in the classroom. Interesting to this study was the fact that between 22% and 25% of the variance in students' projected success in the course and in life (as determined by the professor) was attributed to the students' nonverbal behavior in the classroom. One would think that college professors, who are trained to be critical, would base such important projections on course

work and examinations rather than on what many of them consider to be "trivial" student nonverbal behaviors. Baringer and McCroskey also found that teachers reported being more motivated to teach nonverbally immediate students than non-immediate students with 34% of the variance being attributed to students' nonverbal immediacy behaviors.

*Student Humor*

Manos (2001) examined humor as a relational variable in the instructional context. Knowing that teacher humor has been shown to positively influence students and their learning (Wanzer, 2002), it was also hypothesized that perceived student humor may influence teachers and their teaching. Manos examined teachers' humor orientations and the perceived humor orientation of students. Humor orientation is a communication based personality trait that assesses an individual's predisposition to use humor frequently and in a number of different situations as well as their self-perceived effectiveness in producing humorous communication (Booth-Butterfield & Booth-Butterfield, 1991).

Manos' (2001) research suggested that there was an interaction effect between teacher humor and perceived student humor. Specifically, she found that low humor orientated teachers perceived highly humorous students as being more credible, meaning that they were perceived as having more character and competence, than less humorous students.

Conversely, Manos (2001) found that highly humor oriented teachers perceived less humorous students as having significantly more credibility (character and competence) than low humor oriented teachers. Additionally, Manos found that both high and low humor oriented teachers perceived highly

humorous students as significantly more socially attractive than students who were less humorous.

Manos (2001) also investigated whether humorous students were granted more leniency, in terms of teachers overlooking their misbehaviors, than less humorous students? Rather than student humor influencing a teacher's willingness to overlook student misbehaviors, it was the teacher's humor orientation that influenced their anticipated leniency behaviors. Highly humor oriented teachers were more willing to be lenient with both humorous and less humorous students in terms of overlooking their misbehaviors than teachers with a low humor orientation.

In summary, the results from this study suggested that teachers' humor orientations interacted with perceived student humor to influence not only how teachers perceived their students, but also their anticipated teaching behaviors. Humorous students benefited most from having low humor oriented teachers than high humor oriented teachers in terms of how teachers perceived them. Low humor oriented teachers found highly humorous students credible and interpersonally attractive. Although high humor oriented teachers perceived humorous students as being interpersonally attractive, they found them to be less credible than students who were less humorous. Finally, teachers' humor orientation more so than student humor was shown to influence their anticipated leniency behaviors in terms of overlooking student misbehaviors.

*Experimental Research*

Mottet, Beebe, Paulsel, and Raffeld (2002a, 2002b, 2002c) manipulated student verbal and nonverbal behaviors and examined their effects on four sets of dependent variables including teachers' perceptions of students, teachers'

evaluation of student essays, teachers' willingness to grant students power and subsequently comply with students' requests, and teachers' self-reports of teaching effectiveness, satisfaction, and motivation to teach.

In the first study, Mottet et al. (2002a) hypothesized that teachers would perceive nonverbally responsive (nonverbal independent variable) and talkative students (verbal independent variable) as being more credible (having greater character and competence) and likeable than students who were nonverbally unresponsive and quiet. These hypotheses were supported. Knowing the potency of nonverbal messages in the instructional context and knowing that nonverbal messages stimulate relational meanings more so than verbal messages (Mottet & Richmond, 2002), it was also hypothesized that teachers would perceive nonverbally responsive and quiet students as being more credible and likeable than nonverbally unresponsive and talkative students. It was believed that the nonverbal independent variable would over power the absence of student verbal messages. These hypotheses were also supported. Student verbal and nonverbal messages accounted for 33%, 41%, and 66% (eta$^2$) of the variance in teachers' perceptions of student character, competence, and affect respectively.

In the same study, Mottet et al. (2000a) hypothesized that teachers would evaluate essay exam responses from nonverbally responsive and talkative students significantly more favorably than from nonverbally unresponsive and quiet students. This hypothesis was not supported nor was the hypothesis predicting that teachers would evaluate essay exam responses from nonverbally responsive and quiet students significantly more positively than nonverbally unresponsive and talkative students.

In the second study, Mottet et al. (2002b) hypothesized that teachers would grant students more pro-social forms of power, which have been shown to influence compliance-gaining behavior (Plax & Kearney, 1992). In other words, the more pro-social forms of power we grant to an individual, the more willing we are to comply with his/her request. Expert, referent, and reward are examples of pro-social power. Expert power is granted based on a person being perceived as an expert and knowledgeable in his/her field or a particular area. Referent power is granted based on a person being perceived as likeable and as a role model. Reward power is granted based on whether or not a person is perceived as having the ability to reward another or to remove a punisher. Coercive power is an anti-social form of power and is granted based on whether or not a person is perceived as having the ability to punish another or to remove a reward.

Specifically, it was hypothesized that teachers would grant nonverbally responsive and talkative students significantly more pro-social forms of power than nonverbally unresponsive and quiet students. The data supported this hypothesis for only the expert and referent power bases with 18% and 13% ($eta^2$) of the variance in the respective power bases being attributed to students' verbal and nonverbal communication behavior in the classroom. It was also hypothesized that teachers would grant nonverbally unresponsive and quiet students significantly more anti-social or coercive power than nonverbally responsive and talkative students. This hypothesis was not supported.

This study also examined teachers' willingness to comply with students' requests that most teaches considered to be "above and beyond" the call of duty. It was hypothesized that teachers would be significantly more willing to comply

with students who were nonverbally responsive and talkative than with students who were nonverbally unresponsive and quiet. This hypothesis was supported. It was also hypothesized that teachers would be significantly more willing to comply with students who were nonverbally responsive and quiet than with students who were nonverbally unresponsive and talkative. This hypothesis was also supported. Student verbal and nonverbal messages accounted for 21% ($eta^2$) of the variance in teachers' willingness to comply with "above and beyond" the call of duty requests from students.

Taking this study a step further, it was theorized and hypothesized that that the power teachers granted students would also predict their willingness to comply with students' requests. In other words, student behaviors would be filtered through a perception of power. It was hypothesized that reward, expert, and referent power would predict compliance and coercive power would predict noncompliance. This set of hypotheses was not supported. Student behaviors affected directly teachers' willingness to comply with student requests rather than being filtered or interpreted through a perception of power. This finding may have implications for theory development examining perceived power and compliance gaining.

In the third study, Mottet et al. (2002c) hypothesized that teachers would self-report greater teaching satisfaction, teaching effectiveness, and motivation to teach with nonverbally responsive and talkative students than with students who were nonverbally unresponsive and quiet. These hypotheses were supported. As in the first two studies, teachers also self-reported significantly greater teaching satisfaction and motivation to teach with students who were nonverbally responsive and quiet than with students who were nonverbally

unresponsive and talkative. Student verbal and nonverbal messages accounted for 54%, 26%, and 39% (eta$^2$) of the variance in teachers' self-reports of teaching satisfaction, teaching effectiveness, and motivation to teach respectively.

To summarize this new series of research studies (Mottet, Beebe, Paulsel, & Raffeld, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c), student communication behaviors did not affect how teachers evaluated student essays (although this finding may be the result of experimental design), but they did significantly and meaningfully affect teachers' willingness to comply with students' requests, which may be a form of preferential treatment. Student communication behaviors also affected how much teachers liked their students in addition to teachers' perceptions of student credibility.

Another significant and salient research finding was the effect that student verbal and nonverbal messages had on how teachers perceived themselves. Instructors are often times overlooked in instructional communication research (Nussbaum, 1992). The results suggested that student classroom communication affects how teachers perceived their effectiveness and satisfaction as teachers as well as their motivation to teach. All of these teacher variables have been shown to influence the instructional environment (Denham & Michael, 1981; Gorham & Christophel, 1992).

*Interaction Adaptation Patterns in the Classroom*

Comstock (1999) examined the reciprocal nature of instructional communication. She tested the theory of interaction adaptation (Burgoon, Stern, & Dillman, 1995), which suggests that communication between people remains transactional. Unlike linear conceptualizations of communication where teachers' messages affect students' messages or where students' messages affect teachers'

messages, communication as transaction is where both teachers' and students' communication behaviors simultaneously affect the other's. The theory of interaction adaptation predicts that both parties adapt to the other's communication behaviors and both are responsible for relational outcomes.

Interaction adaptation theory stipulates that there are three interrelated levels of behavior for any given functional set of interaction behaviors including a *required* level of behavior, an *expected* level of behavior, and a *desired* level of behavior. When people enter communication transactions with others, they do so with *required* needs or needs that will drive subsequent interaction patterns. In the classroom, many teachers have required safety and comfort needs that influence their communication with students. When people interact with others they have certain *expectations* for how the interaction will occur. In the classroom, teachers expect students to remain responsive to their instruction. Finally, when people interact with others, they hope to achieve a *desired* level of behavior that is personalized such as a personal goal or preference. In the classroom, teachers have a desire to be successful at their chosen profession and to feel good about their ability to teach students.

The theory suggests that future communicative behavior is determined by what is needed (required), anticipated (expected), and preferred (desired) in any given interaction. Burgoon et al. (1995) referred to this as the *interactional position*. If teachers' and students' classroom interactions provide each other with what is needed, anticipated, and preferred, then the interactional patterns are *reciprocated* back and forth between the two. However, if the behavior that a teacher expects from students does not match actual student behaviors, then teachers compensate by *diverging* or *converging* their behaviors to bring about the

required, expected, and desired levels of behavior. If this attempt fails, then teachers reciprocate students' *actual* behavior.

Comstock tested only a part of this theory. She hypothesized that when students increased their level of nonverbal involvement in the classroom, teachers would reciprocate by increasing their own involvement. Conversely, she hypothesized that when students decreased and maintained a lower level of nonverbal involvement in the classroom, teachers would reciprocate by decreasing involvement. To test her hypotheses, Comstock set up an experiment where she invited 56 randomly assigned professors to present guest lecturers to a class of students who were a part of the experiment. Some of the students were assigned the increased involvement condition and were instructed to increase their nonverbal involvement after two minutes of the professor's guest lecture. The other students were assigned the decreased involvement condition and were instructed to decrease their nonverbal involvement after two minutes of the professor's guest lecture.

The theory of interaction adaptation was partially supported in this first experimental study that examined the transactional nature of classroom interaction. Although the professors' nonverbal involvement behaviors decreased in both conditions, which was not predicted, their behaviors in the increased involvement condition remained significantly and substantially more involved and expressive than their counterparts in the decreased involvement condition. Comstock offered several plausible explanations for why the theory was only partially supported with many of the explanations involving the limitations of the experimental design.

In summary, Comstock reported that even during a single, ten-minute class presentation to a group of students, teachers' role performances were, in part, directed by their students. "Taken together with previous research on the effects of teacher involvement behaviors on student motivation and learning, results suggest that teacher-student interaction is transactional and that teacher-student relationships involve mutual influence, with each partner partially responsible for the other's role performance and important relational outcomes" (Comstock, 1999, p. 22).

*Conclusions and Implications for Teachers*

Three general conclusions can be extracted from this review of recent communication research. First, students' verbal and nonverbal communication behaviors influence teachers' perceptions of them. Second, student communication behaviors influence teachers' behavior. Finally, students are mutually responsible for the quality of their educational experiences.

*Teachers' perceptions of students.* Students' verbal and nonverbal communication behaviors clearly influence how teachers perceive them and how teachers perceive their teaching effectiveness, teaching satisfaction, and their motivation to teach. Despite the myth that only talkative students are punished in the classroom, the consequences for being a quiet student seem to be more severe especially in the American culture where "talk" is valued. Quiet students are at a clear disadvantage because teachers perceive them less positively than more talkative students and because the "Pygmalion" studies suggests that perceptions ultimately influence how instructors teach and behave toward students. The research literature clearly suggests that these two groups of students—quiet and talkative—have different educational experiences.

Instructors have been known to disadvantage quiet students by factoring into final course grades a score that reflects "participation." Participation is oftentimes based on how many times students make oral contributions in class. Teachers must become cognizant of how they form perceptions of their students and how these perceptions influence their behavior toward students. Teachers are encouraged to gather information from multiple sources before solidifying initial perceptions of a student's educational potential and to give students alternatives for communicating with their instructors and fellow classmates. Electronic mail and bulletin boards or list servs are nice alternatives to in-class oral contributions.

Teachers need to be aware of how students' nonverbal communication, which has been shown to convey emotions, feelings, and attitudes, influences how they perceive their students. Student nonverbal responsiveness and immediacy behaviors have been shown to positively influence teachers' perceptions of student affect, credibility (character, competence), interpersonal attraction (social, task), and perceived student success. Teachers also need to understand how they use students' nonverbal messages to assess their teaching. As teachers' perceive more of their students' nonverbal behaviors, they evaluate their own teaching effectiveness more positively and remain more satisfied teaching.

What happens when teachers cannot easily detect student nonverbal responsive behaviors such as in the large lecture hall or when they teach in distance education programs where their instruction is delivered via interactive television or computer? Teachers cannot assume that they are ineffective simply because they do not get the anticipated responses from their students. In these

situations, teachers are encouraged to gather feedback data from students using multiple assessment methods and at numerous times throughout the year. Informal surveys and electronic bulletin board postings are excellent ways to collect evaluation data from students. Collecting data at numerous times throughout the school term rather than waiting for the end of the term gives teachers an opportunity to make any adjustments that might be needed. It is believed that this written student feedback, although not as potent as student nonverbal feedback cues, may influence teaching satisfaction and motivation to teach.

*Teacher behaviors.* Teachers are not immune to student communication behaviors. Instructors teach quiet students differently than more talkative students (Richmond & McCroskey, 1995). Teachers may also give sociable and expressive students preferential treatment in terms of meeting their compliance gaining attempts that include requests that many teachers consider to be "above and beyond" the call of duty.

What may be more interesting to teachers and especially new educators is *how* student communication behaviors influence instruction. The reviewed research suggests that teachers automatically adapt their communication behaviors based on their students' communication behaviors (Comstock, 1999). Teachers' interaction adaptation patterns remain dependent on their individual needs and expectations. If teachers do not get what they need or expect from their students in terms of student communication behaviors, then they adapt their interactions accordingly to see that their needs and expectations are met (Burgoon, Stern, & Dillman, 1995).

Lack of awareness partially explains why some teachers have been known to walk into a classroom energized and optimistic about the day's lesson, but once confronted with lethargic and apathetic students leave the classroom feeling drained and defeated. Other teachers approach the same classroom with the same disposition, but leave feeling more energized and successful as a teacher. In the first situation, it appears that the teacher may have been more susceptible to the students' behaviors and ultimately reciprocated the students' lethargic and apathetic communicative behavior. In the second situation, it appears that the teacher may have been more conscious of the convergence effect and resisted the students' communication behaviors. When the instructor did not get the needed or expected response, his/her instructional communication was adapted accordingly in order to yield the appropriate student response. Although these convergence or adaptation theories have only been tested on a limited basis in the classroom, there is empirical support for the effects they predict in numerous other communication contexts.

New teachers may also be more susceptible to student communication and its effects than more experienced instructors. It is believed that novice teachers might focus more on the self and on how well they present the course content rather than on their students. They focus on students' verbal and nonverbal responsive behaviors for self-confirmation. Because of their need for confirmation, new teachers may seek out student feedback behaviors. What they may not know is how these behaviors influence their teaching. They may lack a critical awareness of how to read and interpret student behavior. Comstock's (1999) research cited above suggests that teachers may have a tendency to

reciprocate student behavior. This tendency to reciprocate students' behavior does not remain a problem unless their behaviors are not conducive to learning.

It is believed that experienced and effective teachers remain less self-centered and more student-centered. They have experience presenting course content and remain more comfortable in their role as a teacher. It is believed that experienced educators may be less susceptible to student behavior and use student behavior as a way to adapt their instructional communication to students' learning needs, expectations, and desires. These professionals may be more aware of how student behaviors affect teachers' behaviors and have in some ways inoculated themselves against student behaviors. It is also believed that experienced and effective teachers interpret more accurately student feedback behaviors. Unlike novice teachers who welcome any type of confirmation—good or bad—experienced teachers may be a bit more discerning in how they interpret and use student feedback behavior.

*Students' mutual responsibility*. Students should be held mutually responsible for the quality of their educational experiences. The majority of students have no idea of how their own behavior influences the type and quality of instruction they receive from their teachers. Many teachers mention on the first day of class that teaching and learning is a partnership and that the success of the class depends on students' classroom involvement and contributions. In many cases, these messages are ignored or not taken seriously.

Over the past several years, there has been a cultural move in the United States to view higher education from a customer service perspective. This cultural emphasis will eventually reach the primary and secondary public education system as tax-paying citizens demand more accountability from their

alleged "sub-standard" educational institutions. For better or worse, viewing educational institutions from a customer service perspective is becoming a reality. Many customer service organizations spend considerable time educating their customers on how to get the most from their products and services. It is time educators do the same. Teachers need to find ways of getting students to understand or to take seriously their role in the instructional communication process. It is time for students to become partially responsible for their own learning. Students can ultimately get more bang for their buck if they engage in good studenting behaviors in the classroom. They must understand how their behaviors—good and bad—influence teacher perceptions and teaching. Students can ultimately bring out the best in most of their teachers.

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